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FRANCIS ASBURY

Francis Asbury: The Prophet of the Long Road. By Ezra Squier Tipple. (New York: Methodist Book Concern. 1916.)

Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury, Bp. of the M.E. Church, 3 vols. (New York: Lane & Scott, 1852.)

THE significance of Francis Asbury in the history of Methodism grows greater with every decade. It may well be that he will line up with Lincoln in the history of America, a classic figure in the ecclesiastical realm matching Lincoln's in the political. To-day by far the greater number of Methodists owe, under God, their place in their Church to the patient endurance, apostolic zeal, and ecclesiastical statesmanship of this noble man. Of all the men that Wesley chose for special work in his later life none was the equal of Asbury. At this moment some eight or nine million communicants look to him as to a great founder. Among the makers of the United States his influence ranks with the highest—Washington and Franklin, Jefferson and Hamilton claim Asbury as a peer.

The story of his life can be read in his own journal best of all. The style is simple, bald, matter-of-fact, and at times tediously repetitive, a narrative of tremendous labour and hardship, lightened here and there with a striking phrase that betokens high purpose and a masterful decision. This is a sample: '*Sunday, May* 21, 1780.—I have peace of mind, but fear we shall have few hearers to-day; it is not far from the rich and great upon James River. I read and transcribed some of Potter's *Church Government* till ten o'clock; was assisted in speaking to about 200 people, who appeared very ignorant and unfeeling. After awhile, I gave them another sermon, not very acceptable to me, and perhaps less so to them; however, I am clear—they are warned. We then set out at four o'clock, rode sixteen miles

over high hills and deep valleys in the dark ; but came safe ; went to bed at eleven o'clock and was up at five o'clock. It is well if this will do long ; I am always on the wing, but it is for God. . . . We suffer much by young preachers and young people ; yet they would do their duty if they knew it.'

Or, ' *Tuesday, May* 23. *Nansemond.*— . . . I spoke on 1 Pet. iv. 18 ; had uncommon freedom ; they appear to be an affectionate, good people ; they collected me money, but I took none ; a man offered me a silver dollar, but I could not take it, lest they should say I came for money.'

His journal has 1,400 octavo pages of such matter. Here and there things are diversified by some startling story of frontier adventure, but in general it is an amazing mass of plain, matter-of-fact, hard labour, for he is ever in the saddle, crossing mountains, fording streams, lying in dirty cabins, contracting disease, suffering at times, and for long periods, persistent ill-health, but never allowing any of these things to move him in the pursuit of his great calling—to win the pioneer folk of a great republic for Christ. His will was iron, and his endurance adamantine. Born and bred in England, he saw the truth (as did no other preacher that Wesley sent out to America in the same degree), that the everlasting fight for political liberty of the English people had its high place on the field in America, and that the Americans were right. Other English preachers, all of them, trooped back to England ; Asbury stood by the stuff. He ran many a risk in doing so, for he was long suspect and in danger of his life even ; but in the end his loyalty to the fundamental Yankee idea gained him an overwhelming authority, influence, and power. Wesley lost his head and followed Samuel Johnson, but Asbury held on with the colonists. Indeed there are times when ' dear Frankie ' proves himself at least the equal, in common sagacity and practical wisdom, of ' the old man,' as their mutual terms have it. The masterful pettishness of Wesley is met by the silent shrewdness of young Asbury as the wave by the rock.

Wesley's greatness never showed more than in his power to understand and appreciate a *man*, and to select the right man for a job. His choice of Asbury for America and his persistent clinging to him, with one rare exception, as the one man there, even though Asbury differed from him, prove his genius in government.

Asbury 'was born near the foot of Hamstead Bridge, in the parish of Handsworth, August 20 or 21, 1745.' His parents were farming and gardening people; his mother was a Rogers, of Welsh descent. Both lived to extreme old age, the father to his eighty-fifth, the mother to her eighty-eighth year. Francis was early sent to school, and read his Bible at six or seven. Under a bitterly hard schoolmaster he remained till he was thirteen, and then went to work in a puddling forge. At the head of the forge was a Monmouthshire Methodist who was on very friendly terms with the Asburys. An apprenticeship in the forge was the result, giving to Asbury the iron frame that afterwards stood him in good stead. At fourteen Asbury was converted, and began the marvellous life of prayer that he ever after lived. At Wednesbury he met a Methodist Society for the first time. 'I soon found this was not the church—but it was better. The people were so devout—men and women kneeling, saying Amen . . . the preacher had no prayer-book, and yet he prayed wonderfully! What was yet more extraordinary, the man took his text and had no sermon-book; thought I, This is wonderful indeed.'

Alexander Mather came with his wonderful prayer-meetings, and his '*now*' sermons. *Now* believe; *now* come to Christ; no other qualification is necessary save your sin and helplessness. When young Asbury and a friend were praying in his father's barn Asbury 'was brought to Jesus Christ, who graciously justified my guilty soul,' he says, 'through faith in His precious blood.' His mother took him, a mere boy, to a religious meeting for women, where she got him to read Scripture, give out hymns, and

eventually to venture on exhortation. He held meetings in his father's house and elsewhere and was made a class-leader at seventeen. A group of young people clung to him. At eighteen he became a recognized local preacher, preaching three, four, and five times a week while working at the forge. At twenty-one, in 1766, he was called out to take up the work of a travelling preacher whose health had failed, and thenceforward his career opened. For five years he served on English circuits, then he volunteered at the Bristol Conference of 1771 for work in America and was accepted. It was the first and last Conference he ever saw in England. He went to it burdened with the impression that he must offer himself for the trying American mission. When the vital words rang out, 'Our brethren in America call aloud for help; who are willing to go over and help them?' young Asbury rose and offered himself.

Then came the parting from his father and mother—a terrible trial. He thrust his one possession into his mother's hand at parting—his much-prized silver watch—and fled. He found himself in Bristol without a penny. Clothes and ten pounds were found him, and so he set forth. He had an iron frame, a resolute and patient soul, great power of will, a practical acquaintance with his Bible, and the knowledge of personal salvation. What he knew he could teach. He had also contrived to gain the elements of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew in the five years of his English ministry. Of course, with his usual modesty he says he was 'exceedingly ignorant of almost everything a minister of the gospel ought to know.' One who knew him intimately in mature life said he was '*a great scholar.*'

Accompanied by Richard Wright, another Methodist preacher, Asbury set sail from Bristol on September 4, and landed at Philadelphia on October 27, 1771. Methodism had already been founded in America. The day of his landing was a Sunday, and he heard Joseph Pilmoor preach in a large Methodist church, lately acquired from the Dutch

Presbyterians for less than a third its original cost. Next Sunday he preached, 'and felt his soul in Paradise.' Then began his journeyings, first to New York, preaching *en route*. He found the itinerant system not established, and was filled with a disquietude that soon broke out. He would not rest in preaching in the city merely; the hamlets must be visited, the countryside covered. Boardman and Pilmoor had betrayed the Methodist itinerant system. Asbury re-established it. On his second Sunday he was twenty miles away preaching in a court-house. Asbury refused to be a chaplain tied to a respectable set or clique. Boardman was willing to go on in New York while Asbury toured the country, establishing a round of preaching-places or appointments. These were held at inns, court-houses, the large houses of gentlemen, or at the smaller homes of the plain people, as providence opened the way. The Methodist itinerant plan and ministry absolutely suited the new conditions of colonial life. It had been given up by Boardman and Pilmoor, but the situation was saved by the hardihood and iron determination of Asbury.

So began the great, free, open-air ministry to the scattered American settlers and the laying broad and fair of the foundations of the magnificent Methodist Episcopal Church. Wherever Asbury went he was well received. The rough, whisky-drinking settlers at times made things lively, but they felt the power of the Spirit in the preaching of the great itinerant, and the work of God broke out among them. Hardship and sickness were Asbury's lot, but he endured as seeing the Invisible.

Among the Methodist Societies he established the discipline afresh and ruled with a kind but iron hand. Jealousy, insult, and detraction he was indifferent to. 'Found that offences increased,' he said; 'however, I cannot help it. My way is to go straight forward and aim at what is right. I am determined that no man shall bias me with soft words and fair speeches, nor will I ever fear (the Lord helping me)

the face of man or know any man after the flesh, if I beg my bread from door to door.' That temper suited crescent America.

When Asbury began his work in 1771 the forces had already begun to operate that resulted in the First Continental Congress and its great ultimatum of September, 1774. The political world was in a ferment. Every man was a constitutional lawyer. The first shot of the American War was fired in 1775 at Lexington. The road and ditches to Concord were spotted with British and American blood. A year later saw silent Jefferson writing out the Declaration of Independence, and then came the weary, trying seven years of bitter war and hardship that ended at last in the peace of September 3, 1783. During these twelve years Asbury laid squarely and firmly the basis of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He set the noble example, and ruled with silent power his militant Conferences. The war had set the population moving rapidly over the barrier of the Alleghanies into the broad areas that stretched down the Ohio to the Mississippi. To follow and minister to the inhabitants of shack and log cabin was his business, and to raise up a body of men who should cope with the mighty task of ruling a puissant race, mastering them by the might of the Holy Spirit. Dangers of all sorts had to be met. The Indian scalped on the track. Wild beast and savage left the skeletons of the white man here and there. Great rivers had to be negotiated without bridge. River bottoms had to be waded in flood-time. Dangerous swamps had to be crossed. Often at nightfall there was no proper shelter, and when shelter was found it was often some crowded cabin, filthy, packed with people, verminous, and the folk themselves often drunken and grossly profane. Fevers smote Asbury, disease made him nurse sores at times in his breast that were well-nigh unbearable even for so iron a constitution, but nothing hindered him from pursuing his God-appointed task. He was supremely fitted

to understand and control the mind that had grown up in America. Silent, indefatigable, unsparing, dignified, unearthly, he moved as a spiritual leader among them. Ten minutes of every hour he tried to spend in prayer. He lived with God and spoke out of the heavenlies.

It is quite certain that Wesley, with his despotic temper and Tory principles, combined with his High Church views, could not have done what his peasant lieutenant so wondrously accomplished. Asbury studied not only Wesley's discipline but the temper of the men among whom he applied it, and before issuing orders he ensured by his good judgement and tact that they would be obeyed. In the long run he ensured that an aristocratic and monarchical power was enthusiastically obeyed in the realm of the Methodist Church, by men who had put down State Churchism and had triumphantly asserted as against the tyranny of the King and the British Parliament the principle that all men are born free and equal and that the people are not governed from above, nor from outside, but by themselves, through their own freely chosen representatives. What a king he was, and what kingly power he exercised among his daring itinerants ! He held an absolute autocracy among them. Whatever the subject at issue, ' on hearing every preacher for and against, the right of determination was to rest with him.' One gasps at the audacity of it. Asbury governed by consenting to be governed ; a free people under a strong episcopal authority was ably and successfully controlled, and a royal highway was blazed and built through a perfect jungle of thorny difficulties. Often Asbury's despair led him to write : ' The Lord must see to His own Church.' And He did, through patient, modest Asbury.

First came the difficulty of the administration of the sacraments in the Societies. Union with the English Methodist customs was in the first place asserted, while liberty was given to Asbury to dispense with the principle at his own discretion where Strawbridge was concerned.

Strawbridge was bishop and elder, evangelist and deacon, to multitudes in Maryland, who recognized in him, under God, their sole spiritual father. He would brook no interference. The sacraments he administered had enough validity for them and for him, and neither he nor they would stand any clerical nonsense. Strawbridge had founded Methodism over wide areas and administered it with the zeal of an apostle. Asbury rode him with a loose bit. The fact that, save in Maryland and Virginia, the State Church was not established made an intolerable situation for Methodist Societies who were bidden to obtain sacraments from a Church that did not exist, or, as often happened, from ministers who, when they did exist, were not seldom unworthy. The political revolution came, and sent a large proportion of the Episcopalian ministers flying to England and King George, while many of those who were left were not admirable characters, to say the least. The Methodist Episcopal Church stepped in to fill the breach. Ordination to preach the word and administer the sacraments followed. By an act of frank simplicity they swept away Wesley's subterfuge, and called the general assistant not a superintendent but a bishop. They left the public to discover the difference between the new bishops and the old. Their fruit showed the nature of the trees. Incredible as it may appear, none of the States had any bishop; they were a mere spiritual appanage of London. Two royal heads had died while London was pondering still how to provide an episcopacy for the thirteen states of the New World. Bishop Lowth, with all his fine scholarship, had no discernment of the times or sufficient practical sagacity to sense, and administer for, the new situation. In vain did Wesley plead for men to be ordained, or present his own tried preachers. He was put off, or objection was made that the itinerants did not know Greek and Latin. Wesley lost his temper, and told him that many of his clergy knew as little about saving souls as catching whales, while his

own itinerants knew their business well and had a better knowledge of the Bible than many clergy.

As a matter of fact, some of the itinerants were men of education. Captain Webb's Greek Testament is still in existence; John Dickins was an Eton College lad and a proficient classical scholar; others, like Asbury, by dint of hard discipline became accomplished men in the course of time. Nothing is more pathetic than Asbury's steady grinding of his Hebrew Bible and his Greek Testament as he wanders homeless through bog and briar, through rock and fell, through swamp and river, wet and weary, fevered and wretched, ever preaching and praying, and progressing with his studies. Had Lowth listened to Wesley, the expansion of England in the ecclesiastical realm would have matched its expansion in the political, 'but blindness fell on Israel.' Even to-day Lambeth fails to sense the situation, and does not realize that the Church of God which grew up under Wesley and Asbury has become the predominant partner in the English-speaking world; the disinherited and disowned overshadows and may yet protect from spiritual disaster those who expelled her. Certain it is that at the moment Anglicanism is in sore need of the Protestant truth and the evangelical experience and ardour that have been all along the outstanding characteristics of genuine Methodism, and her foremost men sometimes are found acknowledging it.

In collaboration with Dr. Coke, Asbury tried hard to found a college for higher education, but it met with a luckless end. Cokesbury College was burnt, and is memorable to-day as having brought from Wesley one of those tart letters that he knew so well how to write, and Asbury so much better how to endure—and yet love and revere 'the old man.'

In the growth of the work Asbury found his journeys extending farther and farther from the centre. To ride through almost impassable tracts and the hardest weather

year after year visiting the Conferences that grew up and were eventually correlated by a Quadrennial General Conference, sometimes covering three, four, or five thousand miles a year, preaching almost daily, often many times a day—this was his great work. He saw the beginning of everything, and helped to shape it all. The growth of the Church was phenomenal. In 1774 there were 2,073 members; in 1784, 15,000; in 1794, 67,643; in 1804, 103,134; and when Asbury died in 1816 there were over 200,000. Little by little the parts of Wesley's arrangements not found useful to the genius of the new Church were quietly dropped. That was true of Wesley's form of the Liturgy; it was also true of the gowns and bands of the bishops and elders. The vigour of a great life needed no meretricious helps or adornments; men prayed as they felt and looked as they habitually were. The new life was its own sanctity and power, directly recognizable and felt; addenda were profane rudiments.

What a life is portrayed here in Asbury's journal! He is in the Alleghanies in 1788 in July. 'We journeyed on through devious lonely wilds, where no food might be found except such as grew in the woods. We met two women who were going to see their friends and to attend the quarterly meeting at Clarksburg. Near midnight we stopped at A——'s, who hissed his dogs at us; but the women were determined to get to the quarterly meeting, so we went in. Our supper was tea. Brothers Phoebus and Cook took to the woods. I lay along the floor on a few deer-skins, with the fleas. That night our horses got no corn, and next morning we had to swim across the Mononghela.'

We have a precious transcript of the homely advice Asbury would sometimes give to his log-cabin hearers, as they gathered in quarterly meeting. Rev. James Quinn, who was with Asbury, wrote down some of his exhortations; as thus: 'But a few words about your manner of living at the present. . . . Keep the whisky

bottle away far from your premises. Never fail in the offering up of the morning and evening sacrifice with your families. Keep your cabins clean, for your health's sake and for your's soul's sake, for there is no religion in dirt and filth and fleas! But of this no more. If you do not want the Lord to forsake your cabin, do not forsake His. You will lose nothing, but be the gainers, even in temporal things, by going, and taking your household with you, even on a week-day; you cannot all have Sabbath preaching. It is time we close the evening service.' Then would follow the great prayer of Asbury. For, whatever he might be in preaching, he was always mighty in prayer, spiritual, fervent, comprehensive, fully adapting it to the state of the country and the Church as they then were. From New England to Georgia, down the Eastern States, and across the Alleghanies, he moved for over forty years with patient, restless energy, till he sank in death at the age of 70 years 7 months and 11 days, as his epitaph has it.

Every form of institution—schools, lower and higher; literature, with necessary book-room arrangements, publishing house, &c.—these and the like had successively to be imagined, and in due course arranged for and administered. Sunday schools begin to date from 1790. A General Fund for worn-out preachers, widows, and orphans has to be raised and kept going. Asbury is in it all, moderating, advising, helping. By 1804 there are seven Conferences, and Asbury has to ride from 4,000 to 5,000 miles a year to get round them.

As the years advanced and the work grew, absorbed as he was in his own task, he met the great men of his time. Many of his estimates are very valuable. The following is his entry on the death of Washington, under Saturday, January 4, 1800 (he is touched for once to music): 'Slow moved the northern post on the eve of New Year's day, and brought the heart-distressing information of the death of Washington, who departed this life December 14, 1799.

Washington, the calm, the intrepid chief, the disinterested friend, just father, and temporal saviour of his country, under divine protection and direction. A universal cloud sat upon the faces of the people in Charleston; the pulpits clothed in black—the bells muffled—the paraded soldiery—a public oration to be delivered on Friday, 14th of this month, &c. . . . I am disposed to lose sight of all but Washington. Matchless man! At all times he acknowledged the providence of God, and never was he ashamed of his Redeemer; we believe he died, not fearing death. In his death he ordered the manumission of his slaves—a true son of liberty in all points.'

These two men, Washington and Asbury, stand out, like Nelson and Wellington, like Wesley and Chatham, the master spirits of their time, moving the minds of men to action like some mighty natural force. The sphere of Asbury was in the realm of religion and morals. He helped to evangelize, and organize when evangelized, a vast multitude of a great new race, with new ideals, into a new type of Christian Church; he flung himself on the hardy, masterful, and often godless American settler, and won him for Christ, introduced Christian ideas and habits into his family life, and sweetened the springs of life of a great agricultural continent. He set on foot influences that finally determined the setting free of the slave and the casting out of the liquor traffic from the U.S.A. He set an example of hardy godliness that has always been the inspiration of the high endeavour of his vast and increasing Church. Invincible patience and enduring ardour never had a much finer example in any cause. A modern, adequate life of Asbury is a desideratum on this side the Atlantic.

The noble centenary study by Dr. Tipple, which appears at the head of this article, describes him as 'this man of extraordinary greatness, who in his generation did more for Christianity on this continent than any other.'

James Lewis.